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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, the term "gender equity" is associated with equalizing the playing field for girls. However, gender equity by definition applies to both genders. This digest states that, in the best possible scenario, gender equitable education provides equal opportunities and enables each student to reach his or her potential, reducing the gender disparities that are detrimental to classroom interactions and in testing; encouraging all students to pursue a variety of school subjects, putting no limit on what they can accomplish; and giving students the opportunity to participate in all aspects of school sports and clubs. It finds that the success of boys and girls in school and beyond depends on gender equity in education. This digest contains the following articles: "What about the Boys?" (Michael Kimmel); "Safe Boys, Safe Schools" (Craig P. Flood); and "The Mythical African American Male" (Martha R. Bireda). Lists 10 resources on gender equity for males. (BT)

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WEEA Equity Resource Center

Digest

Gender Equity for Males

What About the Boys?

By Michael Kimmel, State University of New York (SUNY) at Stony Brook

You've probably heard there's a "war against boys" in America. The latest book of that title by Christina Hoff Sommers claims that men are now the second sex and that boys—not girls—are the ones who are in serious trouble, the "victims" of "misguided" feminist efforts to protect and promote girls' development. At the same time, best-selling books like William Pollack's *Real Boys* and Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson's *Raising Cain* sound the same tocsin. Writing from the therapists' point of view, they warn of alarming levels of depression and suicide, and describe boys' interior lives as an emotionally barren landscape, with all affect suppressed beneath postures of false bravado. They counsel anguished parents to "rescue" or "protect" boys—not from feminists, but from a definition of masculinity that is harmful not just to boys, but to girls and other living things.

In part, both sides are right. There *is* a crisis among boys. But the discussion in the popular media misdiagnoses the cause of the crisis. Consequently their proposed reforms would make it even harder for young boys to negotiate the difficult path to a manhood of integrity, ethical commitment, and compassion. At least the therapists get that part right. But in part, both sides are also wrong, because on most measures boys—at least the middle class white boys everyone seems concerned about—are doing just fine, taking their places in an unequal society to which they have always felt entitled. However, the unchecked crisis among boys has real consequences for all of us.

The current empirical discussion about where the boys are and what they are doing encompasses three phenomena—numbers, achievement, and behavior. These three themes frame the political debate about boys as well. The prevalent data on boys seem to suggest that there are fewer and fewer boys in school compared to girls, that they are getting poorer grades, and that they are having increasing numbers of behavioral problems. We hear about boys failing at school, where their behavior is increasingly seen as a problem. We read that boys are depressed, suicidal, emotionally shut down. Therapists caution parents about boys' fragility, warn of their hidden despondency and depression, and issue stern advice about the dire consequences if we don't watch our collective cultural step. According to these critics, the salutary effects of paying attention to girls have been offset by increasing problems related to boys. It was feminists, we are told, who pitted girls against boys. Though we hear an awful lot about *males*, we hear very little about *mas-*

Continued p. 2, "What About the Boys?"

About This Digest

Traditionally, we associate the term "gender equity" with equalizing the playing field for girls. However, as this *Digest's* title indicates, gender equity by definition applies to both genders. In the best possible scenario, gender equitable education provides equal opportunities and enables each student to reach his or her potential. It reduces the gender disparities that are detrimental to classroom interactions and in testing; it encourages all students to pursue a variety of school subjects, putting no limit on what they can accomplish; and it gives students the opportunity to participate in all aspects of school sports and clubs. Boys need to know that gender equity increases their options, and benefits them, too. The success of boys and girls in school, and beyond, depends on gender equity in education.

Inside:

Safe Boys, Safe Schools ... 3

The Mythical African American Male 9

Resources 11

Guest Editors:

Craig Flood, Gender and Diversities Institute at EDC

Percy Bates, Programs for Educational Opportunity, University of Michigan Department of Education

What About the Boys? . . . continued

culinity, about what that biological condition actually means. Addressing the issue of masculinity will, I believe, enable us to resolve many of these debates, and move forward in a constructive way to create equity in our schools for boys as well as girls.

Boys and girls are on the same side in this struggle, not pitted against each other.

What Do Boys Need?

Introducing the concept of masculinity into the discussion addresses several of the problems associated with the "what about the boys?" debate. For one thing, it enables us to explore the ways in which class and race complicate the picture of boys' achievement and behaviors. For another, it reveals that boys and girls are on the same side in this struggle, not pitted against each other. Further, challenging those stereotypes, decreasing tolerance for school violence and bullying, and increasing attention to violence at home actually enables both girls *and* boys to feel safer at school.[1]

For example, when Thompson and Kindlon describe the treatment that *boys* need, they are really describing what *children* need. Adolescent boys, they inform us, want to be loved, have sex, and not be hurt.[2] Thompson and Kindlon counsel parents to use the following guidelines for their sons allow them to indulge their emotions; accept a high level of physical activity; speak their language and treat them with respect; teach that empathy is courage; use discipline to guide and build; model manhood as emotionally attached; and teach the many ways in which a boy can be a man.[3] It becomes clear that what they advocate is exactly what feminist women have been advocating for girls for some time.

Focusing on masculinity allows us to understand what is happening to boys in school. Consider again the parallel for girls. Carol Gilligan's astonishing and often moving work on adolescent girls describes the extent to which assertive, confident, and proud young girls "lose their voices" when they hit adolescence. At the same moment, William Pollack notes, boys become *more* confident, even beyond their abilities. One might even say that boys *find* their voices during adolescence, but they are the inauthentic voices of bravado, constant posturing, foolish risk-taking, and gratuitous violence. The "boy code" teaches them that they are supposed to be in power, and thus they begin to act as if they are. They "ruffle in a manly pose," as William Butler Yeats once put it, "for all their timid heart."

What's the cause of all this posturing and posing? It's not testosterone, but privilege. In adolescence both boys and girls get their first real dose of gender inequality: girls suppress ambition, boys inflate it. Recent research on the gender gap in school achievement bears this out. Girls are more likely to undervalue their abilities, especially in the more traditionally "masculine" subjects of math and science. Only the ablest and most secure girls take such courses. Thus, their numbers tend to be few, and their grades high. Boys, however, possessed of this false voice of bravado and often facing strong family pressure are correspondingly likely to *overvalue* their abilities and, unlike girls, to remain in programs in which they are less qualified and less able to succeed. Consequently, their grades and other assessment scores may be negatively affected.

This difference, not some putative discrimination against boys, accounts for the fact that girls' mean test scores in math and science are now approaching those of boys. Too many boys who overvalue their abilities remain in difficult math and science courses longer than they should, thus pulling the boys' mean scores down. By contrast, the few girls whose abilities and self-esteem are sufficient to enable them to "trespass" into a male domain skew female data upwards.

A parallel process is at work in the humanities and social sciences. Girls' mean test scores in English and foreign languages, for example, also outpace those of boys. Again, this disparity emerges not as the result of "reverse discrimination" but because the boys bump up against the norms of masculinity. Boys regard English as a "feminine" subject. Pioneering research in Australia by Wayne Martino found that boys are uninterested in English because such an interest might call into question their (inauthentic) masculine pose. "Reading is lame, sitting down and looking at words is pathetic," commented one boy. "Most guys who like English are faggots," The traditional liberal arts curriculum is seen as feminizing; as Catharine Stimpson recently put it sarcastically, "real men don't speak French."

Continued p. 7, "What About the Boys?"

Safe Boys, Safe Schools

By Craig P. Flood, Gender and Diversities Institute, and Susan Shaffer, Mid-Atlantic Equity Center

The current debate about school violence has largely ignored any consideration of gender as a factor. In our view, however, successful intervention efforts demand awareness of the relationship between violence and the construction of masculinity in our culture. Traditional masculine norms in our society continue to dictate that boys must be stoic, tough, competitive, goal-oriented, driven, and invincible. These expectations, conveyed throughout our culture, significantly constrain what is considered socially acceptable behavior for boys. While some of these "norms" reflect positive qualities, other aspects of masculinity are clearly linked to unsafe behaviors, aggression, and violence. Living by these rules often contributes to boys' sense of isolation and feeling that their well-being is solely their responsibility in a world that continues to place value on the "rugged individual." In a panel discussion published in the *Harvard Education Letter*, James Garbarino shares that many boys express the "sense that there is nobody to provide order and stability in their world," and so are left feeling that their safety is up to them.[1] Michael Thompson, in the same discussion, further reports boys' perception that they must be tough and always ready to fight.[2] As concerned educators, we have learned that school safety is, in part, dependent on our ability to create safe and supportive school communities in which boys can explore and construct alternative views of masculinity.

Over the past 30 years we have seen the behavioral boundaries for girls greatly expand. For example, the concept of a tomboy is now outmoded. In fact, the increased involvement of girls in athletics has been shown to correlate with both higher self-esteem and a reduction in teen pregnancy and dropout rates. In the past two years, the U.S. Women's Soccer Team has given girls and young women new role models, as well as permission for them to get dirty and play hard—ideas both previously off limits for them. These new opportunities for girls and women have been recognized as significant contributions to their overall health and well-being.

On the other hand, the behavioral boundaries for boys remain rigid. Boys are still universally encouraged to purge themselves of any hint of softness or femininity. In contrast to the new situation that prevails for girls, many male role models in the world of athletics and the media continue to support stereotypes of masculinity. It is no wonder, then, that males grow up attuned to and comfortable expressing themselves with violence. Boys learn that the fastest way to resolve conflict may be a kick or a punch.[3] In *Why Boys Don't Talk and Why We Care*, the authors found that when girls are rejected or made fun of, they tend to feel ashamed and internalize their feelings of anger about the situation. By contrast, boys externalize these same emotions and tend to express them openly in the form of violence and aggressive behavior.[4]

Despite the current statistics, the fact that 80 to 90 percent of the violence in our schools and in our society is committed by males tells only part of the story.[5] Moreover, boys are three times as likely as girls to be victims of violence. In fact, teenage boys of all racial and ethnic groups are more likely to die from gunshot wounds than from all natural deaths combined.[6] Alarming as these statistics are, critics are quick to assert that they reflect the behavior of a relatively small number of males and that masculinity is not the problem. When all these factors are considered, the challenge for gender equity advocates is to find ways for educators to deflate the traditional concepts of masculinity that underlie violent and antisocial behaviors, and thus to limit their influence on boys' emotional development. Once they understand the links between masculinity and such behaviors, educators can identify early warning signs, search for explanations, work with schools to respond more quickly to danger signals, and develop strategies for addressing the causes and combating them.

School safety is, in part, dependent on our ability to create safe and supportive school communities in which boys can explore and construct alternative views of masculinity.

Disconnection and Development

Both the current literature on boys' development and our own work with and on behalf of

Continued p. 4, "Safe Boys"

Safe Boys . . . continued

boys reveal that the definition of masculinity in our culture is very narrow. Metaphorically, it places boys inside a "box" that limits their emotional and relational development. Healthy psychological development is typically marked by progressive acquisition and integration of new skills and qualities. In contrast, traditional male socialization, as described by psychologist Terrence Real, author of *I Don't Want to Talk About It*, reflects a process of disconnection marked by a successive "disavowing" and loss of qualities essential to boys' emotional and psychological well-being.[7] Kindlon and Thompson, in *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*, describe the "emotional illiteracy" of boys that develops from this process and its bearing on both the personal and social problems that many boys experience in schools. This lack of emotional connection is often mixed with a sense of privilege, power, and entitlement that also stems from traditional masculine ideals. Not surprisingly, these factors may influence boys to behave in disrespectful and antisocial ways toward their teachers and their peers.[8]

Without emotional literacy or intelligence, boys miss the opportunity to gain mastery over their inner lives.

The potential consequence of this psychological detachment and rigidly defined behavior for boys can be found in violent or aggressive acts. James Gilligan, in his study on violence, observed that boys and men tend to be preoccupied with the issue of "weak versus strong" and that this focus may be at the root of aggressive and violent behaviors, as well as expressions of power in personal interactions. He explains, "It's not too difficult to see how quickly that [preoccupation with weak versus strong] evolves into a predisposition to prove one's strength by means of violence, particularly if a child doesn't have nonviolent means available to show that he is strong."[9] That said, it is not surprising that 80 percent of the students diagnosed with social and emotional difficulties in schools are boys, while 71 percent of all school suspensions also involve boys.[10]

Another example of resulting social problems is revealed in the interpersonal dynamic of sexual harassment. By legal definition, sexual harassment is dependent on a discrepancy between the perceptions of the target of harassment and the intent of the harasser. Specifically, it is this "disconnect," reflecting the indifference or inability of harassers to understand how their behavior affects another, that enables sexual harassment to occur. The disrespect or indifference evident in those who sexually harass others suggests a lack of empathy or emotional literacy on their part. Not coincidentally, harassers are most frequently male.

Without emotional literacy or intelligence, boys miss the opportunity to gain mastery over their inner lives. According to Goleman, emotional intelligence is reflected through empathy and healthy interpersonal relationships.[11] By learning empathy, boys become not only more understanding of others but also more aware of the impact their own behavior has on other people. Teasing, bullying, and other forms of disrespect and violence in our schools would occur less frequently if more students felt this emotional connection. Given that boys are socialized to disconnect themselves emotionally, should we not at least be examining that issue in our efforts to reduce violence in schools?

Homophobia: Keeping Boys in the "Box"

Whether it's the fear of being called a "wuss" or a "sissy" or the threat of being identified as feminine, boys of all ages are keenly aware of the strict behavioral boundaries set by the masculine ideal and the high price that is exacted from them for playing "out of bounds." The prohibition is so profound that it extends to the expression of any emotion or feeling, much less a behavior or action, considered to be "feminine." This is a broader conceptualization of homophobia and is far more pervasive and insidious than the "fear of homosexuality" we most often associate with the term. In boys, the development of empathy and the ability to express it are acutely limited by such homophobic boundaries. The fear of being shamed that many boys feel only further disconnects them from qualities that support and sustain the intimacy and connection essential to healthy relationships.

Homophobia is a universal experience for males. Michael Thompson, co-author of *Raising Cain*, describes it as a "force stronger than gravity in the lives of adolescent boys."[12] To hide any appearance of having "soft" emotions, boys create a shield to protect themselves. They often project an outward appearance of strength, confidence, and security even when

Safe Boys . . . continued

all are lacking. For the sake of maintaining this public image, they are reluctant to communicate freely about their feelings or even to ask for help when they really need it. In fact, many are incapable of expressing their emotions, paralyzed by their fear of showing a weak and vulnerable side. The pressure to be a "real boy" is often so powerful that it imposes a significant cost to the boy's health, safety, and authentic sense of being. Homophobia encourages the disparity between outward appearance and inner self, further paving the way toward much of the disrespectful and violent behavior we are seeking to prevent in our schools.

Institutional indifference to homophobia frequently helps to maintain traditional notions of masculinity in school communities. Whether expressed by students or by adults, comments or practices reflecting homophobia often perpetuate a "boys will be boys" attitude that allows for little diversity of thought or behavior among boys. Although often passed off as harmless or even motivational in the sports environment, there is, sadly, nothing innocent about such views of masculinity.

Spend an afternoon on the sidelines of a high school football game and it is not unusual to hear boys chided for playing like girls—or worse, "like a bunch of wusses." Or consider the story last year about a Wisconsin school district basketball coach who, as part of a rebounding drill with his junior varsity team, had the boy who rebounded last wear a woman's panties to the next practice. The coach explained that the so-called "panty drill," was meant to motivate the development of rebounding skills, not humiliate the boys. However, if a boy wore the panties three days in a row, he was further threatened with having to wear a matching bra. In response to parents' protest, the superintendent explained that coaches "were trying to loosen the kids up. They never meant any harm by it."[13]

The fact that such homophobia generally goes unchallenged in the daily discourse at schools only feeds a disrespect and indifference toward others that can become part of the school culture. By some reports, Columbine High School, prior to the shooting massacre there in April 1999, had precisely the type of homophobic atmosphere so marginalizing to those who do not "measure up" to the traditional standards of masculinity. The culture in that school, often described as a male-dominated "jockocracy," enabled students to routinely harass "homos" and "rejects" such as Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, who, for reasons about which we can now only speculate, felt compelled to perpetrate the violent response that resulted. Their response further serves as a tragic reminder that boys often see anger as the only legitimate emotion they can express. Noticing this behavior and understanding its roots are critical requirements for any effort at intervention.

It may have been Harris and Klebold's predilection for violent video games that pushed them over the edge. According to the latest studies on violence and the media, teenage boys spend an inordinate amount of time playing electronic games and have a preference for the violent ones. More disturbingly, boys who play video games with violent content, especially those with high existing levels of anger and hostility, have a greater tendency to become violent than those who do not.[14] Another troubling development is that boys are beginning to insert images of real people and places in their video gamesæliterally putting faces on their video targets as a way of making the game more "realistic." Eric Harris reportedly customized the ultraviolent game Doom in precisely this way. An Internet investigator who found the customized game on Harris' website said that when the two boys entered Columbine they "were playing out their [Doom] game in 'god' mode."[15]

When adults—particularly men—in the school community confront this problem directly, it can have a profound impact on boys.

Adult Male Role Models

Our work with girls and young women has taught us a great deal about the value and power of adult role models. Further, we have found that intervention is most effective when students and adults are given safe opportunities to examine gender roles openly and discuss their relationship to behavior, including violent actions. When adults—particularly men—in the school community confront this problem directly, it can have a profound impact on boys. The program Men Helping Boys with Choices is an excellent example of this approach. Such programs bring together teams of faculty and administrators to explore issues

Continued p. 6, "Safe Boys"

Safe Boys . . . continued

and concerns specifically related to the healthy development of adolescent boys. Their stated mission is to "build and pilot a program for middle school boys that will help them identify the full range of attitudes and characteristics available to them as males, including such traditional ones as courage and forthrightness, but also qualities like compassion and nurturance—characteristics that are less easily identified with boys."[16]

The leading educators in an entire country have openly recognized the emotional power such words carry in the lives of children, especially boys.

From implementing the Men Helping Boys with Choices programs, we learned first hand the value of having adult male role models within our schools and communities who are willing to confront homophobia, openly question traditional notions about masculinity, and teach boys constructive alternatives to fear and violence. In strong support of our own findings, Terrence Real explains that boys are not looking for men who reflect the masculine stereotype. Rather, they hunger for connection and want to know and interact with men who "have emerged from the gauntlet of their own socialization with some degree of emotional intactness."[17] In truth, this level of honesty from both adult men and women provides helpful guidance to boys and supports them well in their efforts to resist the negative impact of gender role stereotypes.

Although they produced some struggle and discomfort among the adult male participants, the Men Helping Boys programs ultimately showed us all the value of confronting traditional masculinity, including our own homophobia. For the men and boys, the challenge was rewarded by the shared sense of connection and freedom that these new visions of manhood created for all who participated. Programs of this kind, when aimed at the healthy development of boys or girls, reveal much about the value and power of adult role models and the creation of safe places to explore and redefine restrictive gender roles.

Finally, those skeptical of the ability to challenge traditional masculinity on a larger scale should note that the Department of Education in Scotland has recently prohibited the use of the epithet "sissy" and related homophobic terms in Scottish schools. Displaying remarkable consciousness and courage, with this bold move the leading educators in an entire country have openly recognized the emotional power such words carry in the lives of children, especially boys. While we readily acknowledge the persistence of these rigid notions, we must move to broaden our ideas of masculinity to facilitate the development of the safe school communities all of our children deserve. Educators and parents must work together to build connections with our boys. We cannot waste one more young life. ✦

Notes

1. "Boys to Men: Questions of Violence," *Harvard Education Letter: Research Online* (Cambridge, Mass.: July/August 1999) http://edletter.org/past/issues/1999-ja/forum.shtml#questions
2. Ibid.
3. D. Sadker, and M. Sadker. *Failing at Fairness: How America's Schools Cheat Girls* (New York: Scribner, 1994) p. 204.
4. S. M. Shaffer and L. P. Gordon, *Why Boys Don't Talk and Why We Care: A Mother's Guide to Connection* (Chevy Chase, Md.: Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium, 2000).
5. C. P. Flood, "Schools Fail Boys, Too: Exposing the Con of Traditional Masculinity," in *Double Jeopardy: Addressing Gender Equity Issues in Special Education Services*, H. Russo and M. Wehmeyer eds., (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001).
6. Shaffer and Gordon, p. 52.
7. T. Real, *I Don't Want to Talk About It: Overcoming the Secret Legacy of Male Depression* (New York: Scribner, 1997).
8. D. Kindlon and M. Thompson, *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999).
9. "Boys to Men: Questions of Violence, http://edletter.org/past/issues/1999-ja/forum.shtml#questions
10. Ibid.
11. D. Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* (New York: Bantam Books, 1995).
12. M. Thompson, quote from keynote address delivered at the Wellesley College *Gender Equity in Schools Conference: A Focus on Boys and Men* (Wellesley, Mass.: January 1999).
13. Associated Press, "Parents Protest Putting Players in Women's Undies." (America Online news website: February 25, 1999).
14. P.J. Lynch, "Hostility, Type A Behavior and Stress Hormones at Rest and After Playing Violent Video Games in Teenagers," *Psychosomatic Medicine*, Vol. 61 (La Jolla, Calif.: 1999) p.113.
15. E. Pooley, "Portrait of a Deadly Bond," *TIME*, (New York: May 10, 1999) p. 32.
16. Capital Area School Development Association, *Men Helping Boys with Difficult Choices: Final Report.* (Albany, NY: CASDA, September 1996).
17. Real, *I Don't Want to Talk About It: Overcoming the Secret Legacy of Male Depression.*

What About the Boys? . . . continued

Boys tend to hate English and foreign languages for the same reasons that girls love them. In English, they observe, there are no hard and fast rules; rather, students express their opinion about the topic, and everyone's opinion is equally valued. "The answer can be a variety of things, you're never really wrong," observed one boy. "It's not like math and science where there is one set answer to everything." Another boy noted:

> *I find English hard. It's because there are no set rules for reading texts. . . . English isn't like math where you have rules on how to do things and where there are right and wrong answers. In English you have to write down how you feel and that's what I don't like.*[4]

Compare this with the comments of a girl in the same study:

> *I feel motivated to study English because . . . you have freedom in English—unlike subjects such as math and science—and your view isn't necessarily wrong. There is no definite right or wrong answer and you have the freedom to say what you feel is right without it being rejected as a wrong answer.*[5]

It is not the school experience that "feminizes" boys, but rather the ideology of traditional masculinity that keeps boys from wanting to succeed. "The work you do here is girls' work," one boy commented to a researcher[6] "It's not real work."

Cultural Expectations for Boys

Some of the recent books for boys do accept the notion that masculinity—not feminism, not testosterone, not fatherlessness, and not the teaching of evolution—is the key to understanding boyhood and its current crisis. Thompson and Kindlon, for example, write that male peers present a young boy with a "culture of cruelty"[7] in which they force him to deny emotional neediness, "routinely disguise his feelings," and thus end up feeling emotionally isolated. Therapist William Pollack calls it the "boy code" and the "mask of masculinity"—a kind of swaggering posture that boys embrace to hide their fears, suppress dependency and vulnerability, and present a stoic, impervious front.

What is that "boy code"? Twenty-five years ago, psychologist Robert Brannon described the four basic rules of manhood.[8]

1. No sissy stuff. Masculinity is the repudiation of the feminine.

2. Be a big wheel. Masculinity is measured by wealth, power, and status.

3. Be a sturdy oak. Masculinity requires emotional imperviousness.

4. Give 'em hell. Masculinity requires daring, aggression, and risk-taking in our society.

Different groups of men—based on class, race, ethnicity, sexuality—express these four rules in different ways. There are as sizable, in fact greater, distinctions among different groups of men as there are differences between women and men. What it means to be 71-year-old black, gay man in Cleveland is probably radically different from what it means to be a 17-year-old white, heterosexual boy in Iowa.

Despite biology and the traditional cliché "boys will be boys," there's plenty of evidence that boys will not necessarily be boys everywhere in the same way. Few other Western nations would boast of violent, homophobic, and misogynist adolescent males and excuse them by virtue of this expression. If it's all so biological, why are European boys so different? Are they not boys?

Masculinity means different things to different groups of men at different times.

We therefore should not speak of masculinity in the singular, but of *masculinities*, in recognition of the different definitions of manhood that we construct. By pluralizing the term, we acknowledge that masculinity means different things to different groups of men at different times.

But at the same time, we can't forget that all masculinities are not created equal. All American men must also contend with a singular vision of masculinity, a particular definition that is held up as the model against which we all measure ourselves. What it means to be a man in our culture is defined in opposition to a set of "others"—racial minorities, sexual minorities, and above all women. The sociologist Erving Goffman once wrote:

> *In an important sense there is only one complete unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual, Protestant, father, of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, and a recent record in sports. . . . Any*

Continued p. 8, "What About the Boys?"

What About the Boys? . . . continued

> *male who fails to qualify in any one of these ways is likely to view himself—during moments at least—as unworthy, incomplete, and inferior.*

I think it's crucial to listen to those last few words. When we don't feel we measure up—or more accurately, when we feel that we do not measure up—we are likely to feel unworthy, incomplete, and inferior. It is, I believe, from this place of unworthiness, incompleteness, and inferiority that boys begin their efforts to prove themselves as men. And the ways in which they do it—based on misinformation and disinformation—cause problems for both girls and boys in school.

By helplessly shrugging our collective shoulders, we abrogate our social responsibility.

Underlying many of these anti-feminist complaints may be the most depressing and widespread assumption that "boys will be boys." This accompanies a defeatist posture, a hopeless resignation: boys are this way and will not change. And the way these boys "are" is violent, predatory beasts; uncaged, uncivilized animals.

Personally I find such images insulting; yes, I'd even use the term "male bashing." And when we assume that the propensity for violence is innate, the inevitable fruit of that testosterone cocktail determined in utero, that only begs the question. We must still decide whether to organize society so as to maximize boys' "natural" predisposition toward violence or to minimize it. Biology alone cannot support the claim that boys will be boys, and by helplessly shrugging our collective shoulders, we abrogate our social responsibility.

Besides, one wants to ask, which biology are we talking about? Therapist Michael Gurian demands that we accept boys' "hard wiring," which, he informs us, is competitive and aggressive: "Aggression and physical risk taking are hard wired into a boy."[9] Gurian claims to like a kind of feminism that "is not anti-male, accepts that boys are who they are, and chooses to love them rather than change their hard wiring."[10]

That's too impoverished a view of feminism—and of boys—for my taste. Simply accepting boys and this highly selective definition of their hard-wiring demands far too little of us. Feminism specifically asks us *not* to accept those behaviors that are hurtful to boys, girls, and their environment—because we can do better than this part of our hard wiring might dictate. We are also, after all, hard-wired toward compassion, nurturing, and love, aren't we?

I'm reminded of a line from Kate Millett's pathbreaking book, *Sexual Politics,* published 30 years ago:

> *Perhaps nothing is so depressing an index of the inhumanity of the male supremacist mentality as the fact that the more genial human traits are assigned to the underclass: affection, response to sympathy, kindness, cheerfulness.*

The question, to my mind, is not whether or not males are hard-wired, but rather which hard-wiring elements we choose to honor as a society, and which we choose to challenge. In this way we can further expand the opportunities for boys by removing the limitations imposed by traditional masculinity standards. We can also make school a safer place for all students to learn to the best of their abilities. ✦

Author's Note

This article began as the keynote presentation at the 6th annual K-12 Gender Equity in Schools Conference, sponsored by the Wellesley College Centers for Research on Women, January 12, 2000. It has subsequently been presented in the course "Gender and Education" at the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University, and various versions have been published in Michigan Feminist Quarterly and TIKKUN magazine (November, 2000). I am grateful to Susan Bailey and Carol Gilligan for the initial invitation to think about these issues.

Notes

1. S. McGee Bailey and P. B. Campbell, "The Gender Wars in Education" in *WCW Research Report,* 1999/2000.
2. D. Thompson and M. Kindlon, *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys* (New York: Ballantine Books: 1999) pp. 195–6.
3. Thompson and Kindlon, pp. 241–256.
4. W. Martino, "Gendered Learning Practices: Exploring the Costs of Hegemonic Masculinity for Girls and Boys in Schools" in *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (Canberra: Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training, and Youth Affairs: ,1997) p. 133.
5. Martino, 1997, p. 134.
6. M. Mac an Ghaill, *The Making of Men: Masculinities, Sexualities, and Schooling* (London: Open University Press, 1994) p. 59.
7. M.Thompson and D. Kindlon, p. 89.
8. R. Brannon and D. David, eds., *The Forty-Nine Percent Majority* (Reading: Addison Wesley, 1976).
9. M. Gurian, *The Wonder of Boys* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1996) p. 53.
10. M. Gurian, p. 53–4.

The Mythical African American Male

By Martha R. Bireda, Ph.D., Southeastern Equity Center, Miami

Our schools are microcosms of the society in which we live. That is, the beliefs and attitudes that are prevalent in the larger society exist in the school setting as well. The experiences of African American males in the larger society are duplicated in the school environment. If African American males are feared and "profiled" on our streets, they are similarly feared and typecast in our schools.

Stereotypical images of African American males have over time become part of the cultural psyche of America. For many individuals, including educators (since they don't leave their beliefs at the school-house door), these images are programmed at an unconscious level and generate an automatic response. Consequently, when unconscious stereotyping of African American males occurs in schools, it commonly produces faulty assumptions, false accusations, and fear. The resultant tension, misunderstandings, miscommunication, and conflict make it impossible for the African American male students and their teachers to develop rapport or a workable relationship. Most often, African American male students become trapped in a cycle of alienation that spirals from disciplinary referrals to suspensions and expulsions to academic failure and dropping out.

History and Mythology

African American male students are the victims of a mythology that began 400 years ago. Historical stereotypes created during the enslavement of Africans continue to define the status of African American males both in society and in our schools. Researchers from the Advancement Project and the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University (2000) found that African American children, particularly African American males, are disciplined more often and more severely in school than any other minority group.[1] To correct these disparities, we must first understand the role that such historical stereotyping plays in the school experiences of African American male students.

Stereotypes are never innocent creations; they always serve a deliberate purpose. In the case of African Americans, stereotypes were created to justify the institution of slavery and to rationalize the contradiction inherent in its existence in an otherwise free society. The most vicious, pervasive, and enduring stereotypes were attributed to African American males.

Joseph Boskin (1986) describes two predominant images of African American males that have survived in some form to the present time: the "Sambo" and the "Brute."[2] The "Sambo" image, which was a vehicle for presenting slavery as a benign institution, was of an inferior well-suited to a servile position in life. Sambo was most often portrayed as a grinning, slow-witted, buffoon given to outlandish gestures and physical gyrations and characterized by irresponsibility, laziness, humility, childishness, docility, and dependency. This image of the African American male helped the American public to regard African Americans as amenable to enslavement and deserving of second-class citizenship.

The "Brute" image of the African American male, on the other hand, represented him as an aggressive subhuman who needed to be controlled. This image, which has persisted since Emancipation and Reconstruction, was most notably associated with the theme of protecting the virtue of white womanhood. The Brute was portrayed as a primitive, animal-like creature, who was noted for his sexual prowess but unable to control his sexual impulses. In addition, the Brute was violent and prone to stealing, rioting, and fighting. Both the media images of the African American male criminal and the "driving while black" phenomenon of racial profiling are present-day carryovers of the Brute image.

Expecting the Worst

Unfortunately, the Sambo and Brute stereotypes survive in some form today and continue to have a negative impact on African American students. The Sambo image inhibits both the

African American males are disciplined more often and more severely in school than any other minority group.

Continued p. 10, "African American Male"

African American Male . . . continued

Stereotyping results in gratuitous disciplinary actions.

academic achievement of African American males and their relationships with their teachers, leading to low expectations as well as disproportionately high referrals to special education and low referral rates to higher-level and gifted courses. In many instances, teachers are more comfortable with the playful, jovial African American male student than with the serious, quiet one, who are perceived to have an "attitude." The Sambo image also creates greater acceptance for the African American male student who is submissive rather than assertive, the latter being perceived rather as aggressive or defiant.

The Brute image leads to a preoccupation with control and unjust labeling. African American male students are held to a higher standard of behavior than their peers. They are the most likely to be punished for minor infractions, and they receive penalties disproportionate to their conduct. In the same way that African American male students are tracked academically, they are tracked behaviorally. When one misbehaves, he is quickly branded a troublemaker and is henceforth never able to escape this label. In many instances, African American male students are set up for misbehavior. The teacher, knowing which "button to push," can easily provoke the student to an angry response and thus have cause to remove him from the classroom. The author has been told by teachers that some of their colleagues use this method when they do not wish to have a certain student in class on a particular day. Finally, while discipline involves both punishment and teaching, stereotyping results in unwarranted and detrimental disciplinary actions.

Changing Perceptions, Expectations, and Outcomes

A 1968 Supreme Court decision described school districts as having the responsibility to take steps to eliminate racial discrimination "root and branch." The root and branch of discrimination against African American male students are the stereotypical images and the faulty beliefs that they engender. In order to attack the racial discrimination that African American male students suffer in school, we must take steps to reject and eliminate these pervasive and persistent stereotypes. ✦

Notes

1. The Advancement Project and the Civil Rights Project, Harvard University *Opportunities Suspended: The Devastating Consequences of Zero Tolerance and School Discipline: Report by the Advancement Project and The Civil Rights Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, June 2000) http://www.law.harvard.edu/groups/civilrights/conferences/zero/zt_report2.html
2. J. Boskin *Sambo: The Rise and Demise of an American Jester* (New York: Oxford Press, 1986).

Implementing Change

The following steps will help eliminate stereotyping of African American males in your school:

1. **Examine your own beliefs and attitudes about young African American males.**
2. **Talk to African American males about their experiences.**
3. **Make others aware of the issues that African American males face.**
4. **Start a "truth about the African American male" campaign. When you see or hear reference to a stereotype, refute it.**
5. **Expect the best of EACH student.**

Resources on Gender Equity for Males

Beyond Heroes and Holidays

A Practical Guide to K-12 Multicultural, Anti-Racist Education and Staff Development

This curriculum helps the user to analyze the classroom for bias and offers a transforming classroom pedagogy. •Edited by Deborah Menkart, Enid Lee, and Margo Okazawa-Rey (1998)•NECA-Network of Educators on the Americas, PO Box 73038, Washington, DC 20056•800-763-9131•ISBN: 1878554115•**www.teachingforchange.org**

Manhood in America

A Cultural History

As the first cultural history of men in America, this book examines how the experience of manhood has defined American males and the American culture. The author shows that throughout history the key driving force for men has been to prove their masculinity.•By Michael S. Kimmel (1996)•The Free Press, Simon & Schuster, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY, 10020•ISBN: 002874067X• **www.simonsays.com/thefreepress**

The Politics of Manhood

Profeminist Men Respond to the Mythopoetic Men's Movement

This compilation of essays provides a provocative dialogue among men—including leaders from both the profeminist and mythopoetic sides of the issue—on the politics of the contemporary men's movement and the current crisis of masculinity.•Edited by Michael S. Kimmel (1995)•Temple University Press, 1601 N. Broad Street USB 305, Philadelphia, PA 19122•800-447-1656•ISBN: 1566393663• **www.temple.edu/tempress**

Politics of Masculinities

Men in Movements (Gender Lens)

Messner explores such topics as "Mythopoetic Men's Movements," "Sexual and Racial Identity Politics," and "Radical and Socialist Feminist Men's Movements."•By Michael A. Messner (1997)•Sage Publications Inc., 2455 Teller Road, Thousand Oaks, CA 91320•805-499-0721•Email: info@sagepub.com•ISBN: 0803955766•**www.sagepub.com**

Raising Cain

Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys

Two leading child psychologists share what they have learned in more than 35 years of combined experience working with boys and their families. They reveal a nation of boys who are hurting—sad, afraid, angry, and silent. The authors set out to answer this basic, crucial question: What do boys need that they're not getting? They illuminate the forces that threaten our boys, such as the belief that "cool" equals macho strength and stoicism. Cutting through outdated theories of "mother blame," "boy biology," and "testosterone," the authors shed light on the destructive emotional training our boys receive—the emotional miseducation of boys.•By Daniel Kindlon and Michael Thompson (1999)•The Ballantine Publishing Group, 201 East 50th Street, New York, NY 10022•800-726-0600•ISBN: 0345424573•**www.randomhouse.org/bb**

Real Boys' Voices

In this book William Pollack talks directly to many boys nationwide. They discuss such issues as homophobia, losing their virginity, and gender roles.•By William S. Pollack and Todd Shuster (2000)•Random House, Inc., 1540 Broadway, New York, NY 10036•212-782-9000•Web: **www.randomhouse.org**

Theorizing Masculinities

This anthology from a variety of disciplines explores ways of studying men and masculinities. The collection includes essays on the intersections of masculinity, race, sexual orientation, and class.•Edited by Harry Brod and Michael Kaufman (1994)•Sage Publications, Inc., 2455 Teller Road, Thousand Oaks, CA 91320 •805-499-0721•Email: info@sagepub.com•ISBN: 0803955766•**www.sagepub.com**

Tough Guise

Violence, Media, and the Crisis in Masculinity

This groundbreaking video explores what it means to be male in the United States at the dawn of the 21st century. Tough Guise is the first educational video geared toward high school and college students to look systematically at the relationship between images of popular culture and the social construction of masculine identities.•By Jackson Katz (1999)•Media Education Foundation, 26 Center Street, Northampton, MA 01060•800-897-0089• **www.mediaed.org**

Violence

Reflections on a National Epidemic

In this groundbreaking book, James Gilligan examines the epidemic foremost in the minds of most Americans—violence. As he tells the stories of the men he treated at a hospital for the criminally insane, Dr. Gilligan traces the devastating links between violence and shame. He shows how that deadly emotion drives people to destroy others and even themselves rather than suffer a loss of self-respect.•By James Gilligan (1997)•Vintage Books, Random House, 1540 Broadway, New York, NY 10036•212-782-9000•ISBN: 0679779124•**www.randomhouse.com/vintage/**

Why Boys Don't Talk and Why We Care

A Mother's Guide to Connection

This book, written for parents of boys, is also an excellent resource for educators and others who work with boys. The authors discuss issues that boys face from a cross-cultural perspective, acknowledging that the existing literature and research tend to have a white, middle-class bias.•By Susan Morris Shaffer and Linda Perlman Gordon (2000)•Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium, Inc, 5454 Wisconsin Avenue, Suite 655, Chevy Chase, MD 20815•301-657-7741•ISBN: 0967961106•**www. maec.org**

WEEA Resources for Equity in the Classroom

These resources, selected from our extensive collection, can help improve classroom systems, interactions, and outcomes for all students. They offer opportunities to infuse equity concepts into all levels of school operation. Call for additional resource recommendations (800-225-3088).

To order WEEA materials call our distribution center at 800-793-5076.

Raising the Grade

A Title IX Curriculum

For K–12 classrooms, after-school programs, and community groups. Building an effective classroom for all girls and boys is the first step toward increasing student achievement. *Raising the Grade* is a collection of fun and interesting activities that will strengthen sixth through twelfth graders' abilities to work together effectively across the diversity of gender, race, national origin, and disability. •By the WEEA Equity Resource Center (174 pp.) 1998•#2810•$17.00

Going Places

An Enrichment Program to Empower Students

For middle and high school administrators, teachers, and counselors. Dropout prevention that focuses on empowering students to be engaged learners can make the difference, as shown by this field-tested model. *Going Places* focuses on enrichment and hands-on, cooperative learning; develops and builds self-esteem; improves problem-solving and decision-making skills; and develops leadership skills.•By San Diego City Schools (433 pp.) 1991•#2713• $50.00

Practical Tools and Support for Gender-Fair Learning

The WEEA Equity Resource Center at EDC can help you find the tools you need to create gender-fair multicultural learning environments.

Call the Center's hotline at **800-225-3088** or **TTY 800-354-6798** for resources and referrals.

The Center's website is full of exciting information and tools, from fun facts about the history of equality to a list of practical curricula designed to help make any subject gender-fair. The Center's website was designed to be accessible to users with disabilities.

www.edc.org/WomensEquity

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